

Rosa Von Praunheim notes
2011 edit

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Army of Lovers, 1979, is a long documentary about the state of the U.S. gay movement. As an assemblage of material from different sources including von Praunheim's own shooting, it has a certain topical interest and broad ranging variety in its investigation, but it is also the kind of piece which dates badly because it is thin on examining any one area in depth and revealing the more profound contradictions present. Part of the problem may be a double focus in the piece. As a documentary for a U.S. audience, especially one familiar with gay and lesbian issues and politics, it is extremely weak in covering some matters--the audience would know there was much more to be said. As a documentary for a European audience, it is much more satisfactory, for it does show the immense size of parades and demonstrations, the range of lifestyles and political positions in the U.S. scene.

Stylistically weak, the film manages to cover a lot of ground by including a good share of footage which is totally uninspired to pretty awful. The voice track carries the films meaning and narration while the visuals form a weak support in most cases. Perhaps some of this is more noticable in contrast to the U.S. made documentaries about the gay and lesbian movement such as ***Word Is Out*** and ***Before Stonewall*** which tend to be quick cut and influenced, even if indirectly, by the fast pace of tv news documentary. But a good part of the sluggish effect of the whole is due to von Praunheim's own flaccid interviewing style which seems to assume

that apparently unrehearsed interviews are always best and asking fairly banal questions will elicit interesting answers. In actual fact, however, what von Praunheim gets are fairly standard responses which do not reveal very much about the personality of the respondent. For example, Harry Hay, a former Communist Party member and founder of the Mattachine Society, the first U.S. homosexual rights organization, has given better interviews in print and on film and video to others.

Von Praunheim's presentation has its own experimental dimension because he has a nonsynch sound track interview which is matched to a sequence of Haywith, his lover, and some others sitting around. The camera zooms and pans with no special logic while Hay tells the story of founding the organization. This can be taken as disconcerting and distanced visual style which reorders our understanding of the verbal material, or it can be taken as inexplicably inept. But the next interview, with movement veterans Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon explaining their founding of the Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian organization, gives us a conventionally routine synch sound, fixed camera recording of the information. The result is that film as a whole just seems to bump along unevenly, stylistically and politically. For example, at the start von Praunheim says that his film cannot speak for lesbians who must make their own films about their movement, but he then proceeds to include a few lesbians so the film seems to say something about them. In retrospect the initial disclaimer seems to be a "cover your ass" statement to allow later inclusion of available footage, including almost ritual denunciations of gay male misogyny. Yet the question is not really considered in the film's most dramatic footage which shows an Anita

Bryant press conference at which a male protestor hits her full in the face with a cream pie. As the camera zooms in on her face and reaction and as her husband begins to insist that they pray for the attacker, we have an extreme closeup of her humiliation, and near-tears reaction. On one level it's great reportage and funny to anyone opposed to Bryant's virulent anti-gay campaign in the late 70s. But it's also, in fact, a public physical assault on a woman by a man. To leave that unremarked upon makes the filmmaker's claims to be critical of misogyny seem totally hypocritical.

As in **It Is Not the Homosexual...**, the voice-over narrator provides direct and sometimes sarcastic commentary in the best angry radical style. One radical interviewee critical of the reformist trend in the movement offers the observation that, "We didn't think that getting 700 leather bars and a chance to serve in the army was what we wanted when we started the gay revolution." [quoted from memory] The National Gay Task Force is described on first introduction as a conservative and usurping organization which aims at lobbying and drinking tea in the White House to get reforms (clearly marking the film as coming out of the liberal Carter presidency). It could be more accurately described as a conventional liberal reform pressure group using legislative strategies. But it's refreshing to hear the voice and analysis of the more radical community-based and direct action tactics part of the movement as the core reference point of the film's narration. Most U.S. gay and lesbian documentaries have remained respectful of the reformist wing, if not openly a part of it, and tended to repress the more angry and life style extremist parts of the gay population. Von Praunheim takes on the

stickiest of issues by including a gay Nazi and an outspoken advocate of physical sexuality between older men and teenage fellows--something that would never be seen in the gay documentaries aimed at PBS diffusion.

In another tv no-no, von Praunheim puts himself directly in the film by including a segment shot by his filmmaking class at the San Francisco Art Institute showing him engaged in lovemaking with a local gay porn star. There's a kind of irrefutable testimony to having the director sucking cock on screen. This is, after all, what gay lovemaking looks like, this is what gay men are ostracized for, this is what all the "we're just like you except for what we do in bed" appeals to the heterosexual majority end up hiding. But as bold as the inclusion of sex is, the context remains vaguely defined. Von Praunheim tells us voice over that he thinks it's important to be honest, but tells us nothing about his relation to his sex partner or his students who are doing the filming. Was the other guy paid for his performance? Had they made love before? Had they met before? How did von Praunheim choose this guy over others? How did he deal with possible student shock or squeemishness about the filming? These practical and ethical questions are hardly negligible, especially given the director's condemnation of casual sex in his previous film, yet there's no mention of them.

As a wide ranging survey and situation report on the state of the gay movement at the end of the 70s, the film incorporates footage from many sources besides von Praunheim's own shooting, but it wavers between straightforward reportage and fairly dogmatic analysis. It's not

clear what audience it is trying to reach. It seems to be talking to moderate and closeted gays when at the end it argues against the closet and against complacency and against reformist strategies in the face of continued attacks on gays. "The system eats movements that take its bait."

By relying on so many testimonies to make its points, the film runs into the problem of conflicting authorities. By giving prominence to some spokespeople and famous figures such as porn star Fred Halsted and writer John Rechy the film validates celebrities and authorities (though it thankfully leaves out the shrinks, physicians, and professors who usually crop up). The film also includes a good number of fag-on-the-street interviews which feature vague politics and vague commitments. The result is an oversimplification of the issues with a good many categorical statements which should have been qualified and nuanced to do justice to the complexities of both the movement and individuals.

Von Praunheim constantly wants to have it both ways. He openly criticizes the masculinist tendencies in the gay men's community, and then prominently features his own physical encounter with super hunk Fred Halsted, and the anonymous big cock in his film class. But this is not presented as a contradiction. Nor are other extreme differences examined in terms of a philosophical or organizational problem for the movement. Thus we have a gay marriage ceremony and anonymous cruising depicted but not considered as reflecting differences in the community about the nature of sexuality and relationships, the sources of those differences, and conflicts in building a movement because of them.

Similarly, von Praunheim seems critical of the apparent frivolity of gay masquerade at the Mardi Gras in New Orleans when he asks what relation it has to political consciousness, and then just reports the reply that its a kind of prepolitical expression, a marker of public coming out that may lead to a raised consciousness later. But this central question of the relation of lifestyle and sensibility and participation in the cultural and social sector of the movement to politics is never thought through by anyone in a very significant way. Not that the film should or could resolve the question, but it never really approaches the matter as a serious one that people have thought about a great deal.

One could make an argument about the politics of carnival.

In the same vein, very important organizational models and campaigns such as the 1977-78 California campaign against the Briggs amendment (which would have removed homosexuals from teaching in public education) are mentioned, but not examined. Many lessons for organizing, including new ways of gays and lesbians working in coalition were developed, but the film seems ignorant of them. Most interesting as a sampler of the gay movement at the very end of the pre-AIDS era, von Praunheim's film fails in overall design or concept.

I first encountered a Rosa Von Praunheim film in the late 70s when I saw **It is Not the Homosexual But the Society in Which He lives Which is Perverse** (1971 US release 1977). The screening was in San Francisco in a commercial theatre and predictably, the large audience was mostly gay men. Because it was the west coast premiere of the first Von Praunheim film to be shown in the States, the audience didn't know what to expect.

What they got was certainly unexpected. For -- minutes the film unreels one episode after another with the same structure. One gay lifestyle or behavior is introduced by a voice off narrator while a dramatic narrative begins (without sync sound). Just as the audience is drawn into the story, the narrator re-enters the flow of the film to point out the political incorrectness of what the audience is seeing. The narrator then dogmatically criticizes the people on screen before we move on to the next vignette.

The film begins with a young fellow from the provinces arriving in the city and needing a place to stay. His friend offers to share an apartment and everything seems to be going along fine until the narrator underlines the lecherous intentions of the apparently cordial offer. Friendship, ha! In the next episode, homosexually initiated, the still unsophisticated fellow takes up with an older man who introduces him to the world of art, music, and high culture. But, the voice of the narrator interrupts, this circle of gay men is not interested in Art but in seducing naive young guys. Culture is just a veneer for sex.

In each of these episodes, the audience laughed loudly at the unmasking of the stereotypes. But as the film went on, relentlessly demolishing one type after another, people began to get uncomfortable and leave, as their own lifestyle was held up to ridicule, narrational contempt, and political criticism. In one sequence a short fellow in a flowered shirt is seen hanging out outside a public toilet. Along comes a gang of toughs who spot him and proceed to beat him up, throw him down and stomp on him. As they leave the scene and the camera shows the bloody and bruised

result, with audience sympathies drawn toward this victim of arbitrary assault, the relentless narrator, in voice-of-God style, comes on the sound track to call the guy a wimp for not fighting back. The shock effect of such a scene is startling, for everyone in and around the gay community knows stories of, if not personal testimony to queer bashing. One's sympathy is automatically drawn to the victim, and we hardly expect to suddenly have a loud and un pitying voice blaming the victim. But this is the key logic of much of Von Praunheim's political films. He refuses sentimentality and insists on a political interpretation. In this he takes Brechtian distancing in film a considerable step farther than even Godard and Godard-Gorin. In the latter's films such as *Wind From the East*, one experiences a tireless insistence on politics, but also one senses an obsessive concern with the means of expression, with cinematic development, at the same time. Von Praunheim's mise-en-scene is functional and uninspired, and as a result the raw message is always foregrounded.

The result is also calculated to offend the audience. At the screening I attended, people kept leaving after their lifestyle was criticized. The row of leather men in back of me all laughed and commented on all the other stereotypes. But they got up and left after the narrator commented on a scene of guys touching and kissing each other's chains and leather jackets that these men had fetishized the symbols of straight masculinity and that in so doing they tried to escape their gayness and ended up fitting into the dominant sexist system. The films relentless didacticism continues to the final sequence which depicts the only positive solution to the problems shown: collective living arrangements with economic and

sexual communism.

Von Praunheim made *It is Not the Homosexual...* in Germany before he knew of Stonewall and the dramatic change in the gay movement in the States. When he showed it in New York it met with very heavy criticism, some of which was recorded on film and which was subsequently included with the film as an afterword or appendix. With this addition, the film allows for the presentation of an autocritique which strengthens the overall project.

With **A Virus Has No Morals** (1986) Von Praunheim turned to an urgent current topic, AIDS, but an unconventional approach: comedy. The film is intended as a dark farcical view of the AIDS crisis which can provoke thought about the issues. Comedy, Von Praunheim, argues in presenting the film, allows for a loosening up of the audience that promotes post-screening discussion, whereas the serious and sentimental approach simply cuats off discussion by letting everyone feel sorry for the victims. With such a view Von Praunheim is clearly following in the Brechtian tradition, but he colors the product with his own penchant for campy exaggeration and gallows hujor.

The film begins with a cocktail party at which various characrters discuss the AIDS crisis. One woman declares authoritatively that cancer isn't so bad because it feeds more people than it kills. The perverted and relative truth of her observation is revealed when we find she and others present are making money off the AIDS situation as researchers, therapists, sensational journalists, and so forth. As the group begins watching a

promotional film about AIDS, a group of masked armed figures enters and stops the event in the name of gay liberation.

Von Praunheim appears as a major character in the film, playing the owner of a gay bath house who refuses to promote safe sex in his business while he himself is dying of AIDS. Dramatically, a kind of farcical Mother Courage figure, he is introduced telling his live in lover, a starry eyed romantic church music student, about another hectic day at work. Someone shit in the sauna, someone else slipped on it and got hurt, and the insurance won't pay the damages. When an accident forces him to reveal that he has AIDS, his lover rapturously imagines how nice it will be to nurse a dying man. When Von Praunheim phones his mother, she refuses to help him--pointedly reminding him that he didn't do anything for her when she had her mastectomy. The dramatic reversals of expectation such as a lover ecstatic with the loved one's immanent demise, and a mother totally unsympathetic to her child's illness, function to make the political point.

A set of highly exaggerated characters complete the drama including a chorus of drag queens who add sarcastic comments, a female journalist for the sensational tabloid press who makes up panic peddling AIDS news, a doctor who gets a hefty grant to do research in Africa on AIDS (and who, in a moment of poetic justice is bitten by an infected monkey), nurses in an AIDS ward who roll dice to bet which patient will be the next to die, and a psychotherapist who claims that AIDS is simply psychosomatic and can be cured by extreme forms of regression therapy. That these comic grotesques mock women introduces a certain problem.

Questioned about this at the Chicago International Film Festival in 1986, Von Praunheim offered two defenses. He said that he preferred to show women who were strong and evil to ones who were good but weak. And he argued that gay men have to get beyond their fixation with mothers and women; this seemed, however more of an autobiographical confession than satisfactory answer to the political question of ridiculing women.

Two documentaries of a proposed trilogy. Positive, made for German television covers New York City especially in summer 89, though with some historical footage of earlier developments. Basically, its a general survey of the most activist part of the male homosexual AIDS movement, focussing in particular on activist and polemicist Larry Kramer and generally validating his viewpoint. The most obvious omission is any depiction of the situation of the Black and Puerto Rican communities from spokespersons addressing the issues from within their communities, and discussion of needle drug spread of AIDS. These are referred to, but only in passing. We see cries of "Shame, Shame" from ACT UP denouncing an official regarding needle exchange. And we see some shots of the deterioration of the city, but from a distance, often moving vehicle. As if they wouldn't dare take the camera into or themselves appear on the street in those communities, nor did they seem to have anyone who could give them access into those communities.

An unintroducted voice over narrator makes major points and bridges the various sections. First Phil Zwickler, filmmaker, etc, is shown being interviewed by VP on camera and he argues that VP will just make

another VP film, flamboyant and weird, and he isn't sure he wants to be interviewed (yet this has a certain self consciousness about it--it doesn't seem totally spontaneous, but it doesn't seem easy)

Early on, Larry Kramer is introduced, and he reads from his writings of the 1982-83 period when Gay Men's Health Crisis was formed and Kramer's writings in the New York Native and elsewhere were influential in shaping much opinion in the gay community about AIDS. Kramer, who had earlier depicted in a novel, *Faggots*, what he saw as the hollowness of gay ghetto and its pursuit of sex and materialism, argued that the gay community had to come out to fight this epidemic. Thus the closeted man was an enemy to be denounced, only numbers and militancy could save people. (this turned out to be true and logically lead to "outing") at the same time, Kramer argued against anonymous and casual sex until people knew what the actual risks were, which led others to see him as a puritan and narrow moralist. He's probably best understood as a single minded polemicist who won't grant anything to others and stridently insists on his own point of view, which he seems unwilling to change or modify through dialogue.

Also depicted at various times in the films is Michael Callen, a PWA who has lived for a long time (c. 7 years). his activism is mentioned but not really depicted or discussed, we see him singing and playing music with his musician-lover...he is thus not taken to be a thinker, like the sometimes abrasive Kramer.

GMHC is shown and the fundraising effort needed because the

government does not respond. Zwickler's *Chance of a Lifetime* is shown in excerpt (though it's not clear if he did the whole thing or just a part of it, and its incredible polish is not matched by the present product, which makes it seem that whatever VP touches turns to shit.

Women are not given much presence or voice in the piece. Novelist Sarah Schulman appears briefly in a very brief interview that states a set of generalizations: in the feminist movement lesbians found it difficult to work with straight women because of their homophobia, when they began to work on AIDS issues they found that younger gay men were not sexist, thus a coed homosexual movement could exist. Which is partly a historical truth, but which also doesn't deal with essential issues, because it rests on unqualified categorizations. Were all straight women uniformly homophobic? of course not. were many organizations, projects and coalitions efforts made which included both and put forward an anti homophobic line, of course,

Hero worship: Charles Ludlam, Arthur Bressan